POINT OF VIEW

What Should be Secret?

By RICHARD FRYKLUND
Star Staff Writer

A secret document was once read to this reporter by a Defense Department lawyer who was investigating "security leaks."

Another time it was a Secretary of Defense who read from a top-secret document.

In fact, almost everyone in the Pentagon who talks to reporters, even casually, at some time or other gives out information contained in a classified document.

This is not to say that all of these officials and officers are irresponsible. On the contrary, in disclosing classified material, they were doing their jobs properly as they saw them.

This situation is cited here to point up the extraordinarily difficult problem facing witnesses in the current House Government Information subcommittee investigation of the Pentagon and the press.

Pentagon officials, who will begin testifying Monday, may say that the problem can be solved by keeping reporters away from classified material. But this won't work.

Reporters and editors will tend to claim that officials are classifying too many documents and depriving the public of information that rightly belongs to the public. But this does not

in the opinion of the officials involved, but almost everything he told was contained in documents carrying the highest classification.

He divulged classified information, but he did not give away any vital secrets.

Normally, the classified information going to a reporter falls into this category. Almost every Pentagon conversation touches on it. Many stories contain this kind of information.

But there are other kinds of stories.

Some months ago a Government official gave Star reporters some of the information the Atomic Energy Commission had learned about the new series of Russian atomic tests. The official said that the Russians knew, so why shouldn't the Americans?

The reporter did not attempt to answer the question themselves; they took the question —and the information they had —to officials who were competent to answer. The officials recommended that some of the information be suppressed, and that advice was followed.

About a week after the truncated story was printed, the AEC put virtually the same material into a press handout.

Soon after, a Defense Department lawyer invited me to his office to answer questions about the story, which carried his reporter's name and that of Earl H. Voss, the Star's State Department reporter.

The lawyer said that the person who gave us the information was a "traitor" and was disloyal" to his Government. In fact, he continued, anyone who would pass on classified information was disloyal.

Then, to prove that the story did contain classified information, he read from a report analyzing the story.

The report was stamped "Secret" in large red letters.

the original information thought he was doing right just as the lawyer did when read the classified document.

But where they right? And what should the reporters have done with the information?

That is one for worriers about the Pentagon and its press relations to ponder.

Other stories have announced policy changes before the officials were ready or have told some story in a way calculated to put officials in a poor light.

These are embarrassments, too, but they do not damage the national security.

How to Prevent It?

Undoubtedly some stories have hurt security—although this writer personally has heard of only one. In that case a careless official and an unknowing reporter combined to tell the Russians too much about a particular intelligence operation.

How could that mishap have been prevented? Neither the official nor the reporter involved in the unfotunate incident realized what he was doing. Neither tighter classification rules nor more freedom of information could have helped.

As with the whole "leaked secrets" business, there is no easy answer.